

Egyptian Military Repeats Demands for End to Strike Wave

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Global Research, February 16, 2011

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 16 February 2011

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Egypt's ruling military command yesterday again demanded an end to workers' protests and strikes throughout the country.

"The council is well aware of the economic and social conditions being suffered by the community," a military source told Egypt's state news agency MENA. "However, it cannot resolve these issues until the strikes, protests, and the disruption of production ends... The result of that will be disastrous." He continued that people had "the right to protest and organise strikes, but [such actions] are not suitable under the present circumstances", adding that "the council does not have a magic wand with which it can instantly eliminate corruption".

The army has issued such statements nearly every day since assuming power following the ousting of former President Hosni Mubarak. They reflect the acute fear with which the generals and the entire Egyptian ruling elite regard the developing movement of the working class.

Yesterday was a scheduled public holiday marking Prophet Muhammad's birth, yet reports continued to emerge of workers' protests. Authorities were forced to announce that the country's banks would remain closed for the rest of the week, due to strikes by bank workers for better pay and conditions. In a statement broadcast on state television yesterday, Egypt's central bank urged an end to the strikes "to ensure the stability of the national economy".

Strikes in some factories have reportedly been called off after workers were granted significant wage increases. Many other plants, however, remain affected by industrial action.

According to reports citing the MENA news agency, Suez Canal workers yesterday staged a sit-in protest at the canal authority's headquarters in Ismailia, demanding higher wages. The action did not affect ships' navigation through the strategically vital naval passage. "We will continue our sit-in until the Suez Canal Authority chairman responds to our demands," one of the protestors told MENA.

A textile industry web site reported that in the Nile Delta city of El-Mahalla El-Kubra, up to 24,000 employees of the state-owned Misr Spinning and Weaving Company have declared an indefinite strike to demand an increase in the minimum wage. Reuters also reported that Arafa Holding, Egypt's largest garment exporter, announced a two-day closure of its factories in Tenth of Ramadan City, on Cairo's outskirts, in response to a strike yesterday

involving at least 1,500 workers.

The Associated Press noted some of the other protests and struggles: "Protests by hundreds continued in at least seven provinces outside Cairo, including by government workers and police over pay. Fishermen in the Nile Delta demanded an end to restrictions on where they can fish in a lake north of the capital. Sugar cane growers in the southern city of Luxor demonstrated demanding higher prices for their crops."

The Egyptian workers' fight for improved wages and decent working conditions poses a direct threat not only to the military's substantial commercial operations in the country, but also to the operations of the global financial markets.

In Greece last year, just across the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt, international finance capital seized on a sovereign debt crisis to orchestrate a savage attack on workers' living standards. Concerns are now being voiced in financial circles over the size of Egypt's debt, signalling that it may soon become a target. On Monday, the head of Egypt's Central Auditing Agency, Gawdat El Malt, announced that state debt stood at \$184 billion in June 2010, equivalent to 89.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). This, he warned, was "above a safe level".

Ratings agency Moody's already downgraded Egypt's sovereign debt rating on January 31, twelve days before Mubarak was overthrown. "There is a strong possibility that fiscal policy will be loosened as part of the government's efforts to contain discontent," Moody's declared. "A background of rising inflationary pressures further complicates fiscal policy by threatening to increase the high level of budgetary expenditure on wages and subsidies."

The military government has ordered a 15 percent increase in public sector salaries and pensions, further increasing the budget deficit, which stands at 8.1 percent of GDP. "I doubt that there is sustainability in this situation," Abdel-Fattah El-Gabali, a monetary policy expert with the Ahram Center for Strategic and International Studies in Cairo, told the Associated Press. "Monetary policy is going to be very complicated in the coming period. After the elation over the revolution (dies down), you will have a sharp blow from reality."

While drawing rebukes from the financial markets, the military's limited concessions have not satisfied the working class. The BBC noted that at several workers' rallies in Cairo this week, banners have featured the figure of 1,200 Egyptian pounds (\$US205), which is the minimum monthly wage being demanded by some of the newly developed labour organisations. The sum is about double the average wage of a skilled Egyptian public sector worker.

The military is stepping up efforts to consolidate its rule. In a concession to demands for the prosecution of Mubarak's brutal security chiefs, the generals have sacked Adly Fayed, the interior ministry's director of public security, and Ismail El Shaer, Cairo's security chief. There are also moves to recover the enormous wealth accumulated by the Mubarak family and close cronies, estimated in the tens of billions of dollars.

Egypt's military government has ordered a new constitution to be drafted in just ten days by an unelected panel of eight jurists. Each panellist was selected by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mubarak's old right-hand man in the armed forces, who is personally overseeing the drafting of the new constitution. Tantawi reportedly chaired the panel's first meeting yesterday.

Tareq al-Bishry, a retired judge, is the formal head of the panel, which also includes prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, former parliamentarian Sobeh Saleh. This appointment is another indication of the Islamists' support for the military government. The Muslim Brotherhood yesterday announced it would form a political party once a new constitution permitted it to do so, but reiterated that it would not stand a presidential candidate when elections were convened.

All the official "opposition" tendencies—including the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change, the Wafd and Tagammu—are as hostile to the working class as is the military. Having initially stood aside as Egyptian workers and youth courageously challenged Mubarak's security forces, they now hope to bring the revolutionary movement to a close as soon as possible.

Many of the youth-based organisations that helped coordinate the anti-Mubarak protests are also working to bolster popular illusions in the role being played by the military. Walid Rachid of the "April 6" movement told the New York Times that some members of his organisation were concerned about the retired judge appointed to head the constitutional panel, but "were ultimately satisfied by his reputation for independence".

According to Al Ahram, other representatives of "April 6" told the military on Monday that they did not want elections to be held before 9 to 12 months.

There are signs of emerging opposition to the military's agenda. Yesterday, the newly formed "Professionals Coalition"—comprising new organisations of doctors, teachers, university staff, and intellectuals—demanded that the new constitution be determined by an elected constituent assembly.

An article in the British Guardian newspaper, "Egyptian army hijacking revolution, activists fear," cited the remarks of an unnamed member of a coalition of youth groups: "It's all very well for them [the military] to be apparently implementing our demands, but why are we being given no say in the process? Many of us are now realising that a very well thought-out plan is unfolding step by step from the military, who of course have done very well out of the political and economic status quo. These guys are expert strategic planners after all, and with the help of some elements of the old regime and some small elements of the co-opted opposition, they're trying to develop a system that looks vaguely democratic but in reality just entrenches their own privileges."

The Obama administration is continuing its efforts to support the military regime and oversee the transition to a right-wing government committed to both implementing the dictates of the financial markets and maintaining Egypt's strategic alliance with the US and Israel. "What we've seen so far is positive," President Obama declared yesterday. "The military council that is in charge has reaffirmed its treaties with countries like Israel and international treaties."

The New York Times has reported that the White House and State Department are discussing plans for additional funding for programs designed "to bolster the rise of secular political parties". Democrat Congressman Howard Berman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has called for money to be directed toward the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the National Endowment for Democracy—organisations which played a key role in helping install several pro-US governments through so-called colour revolutions in the Balkans and Central Asia under the

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